

BIRGIT DÄWES

**Terrors of Territory:
Mary Rowlandson, Charles Brockden Brown,
Shyamalan's *The Village*, and the Haunting of the
American Frontier**

Abstract: One of the most persistent topoi in American culture is the mystique of the frontier. From John Smith's adventurous account of colonizing Virginia to the contemporary road movie, and from Frederick Jackson Turner's declaration of the frontier's closure to its revivals in *Star Trek* or *Avatar*, narratives of pioneering and conquering the 'wilderness' continue to serve as defining metaphors of the national imaginary. What is often left out of these tales, however, are their subtexts of terror and violence. As Richard Slotkin, David Mogen, and other critics have argued, the frontier's implications of uncanny encounters with the Other, of existential threats and uncertain spatial orientation, have made it a suitable setting for gothic fiction – and thus also an ideal space for the negotiation of sociopolitical anxieties. In tracing precisely the connection between terror and territory from the Puritan salvation narrative to the contemporary horror film, this paper explores the multilateral reverberations of frontier gothic. With the examples of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative (1682), Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799), Eduardo Sanchez's and Daniel Myrick's *Blair Witch Project* (1999), and M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004), I will highlight the processes and techniques by which the semantics of the frontier is recoded along the lines of spiritual, gendered, ethnic, psychological, and – not least – narratological and aesthetic boundaries. The encounter with the Other, I am arguing, is deeply invested with alternative meanings, emphasizing ambiguity, unreliability, and the fallacies of representation. Engaging the mode of frontier terror thus significantly contributes to the Gothic literary tradition, but it also forms a powerful subtext to American historiography.